

Remarks on Labor Day in Detroit, Michigan

September 5, 2011

The President. Thank you, Detroit. Thank you, Michigan. Oh, this is a——

Audience members. Four more years!

The President. Thank you. Thank you, everybody. It is good to——

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The President. Thank you. Thank you, everybody. I can tell Ghana got you fired up. Thank you, Ghana, for that introduction. Thank you all for having me. It is good to be back in Detroit. I'm glad I was able to bring a friend, a proud daughter of the Teamsters, your Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis, in the house.

We're thrilled to be joined by so many other friends. I want to acknowledge, first of all, two of the finest Senators in the country: Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow in the house; outstanding members of the congressional delegation: John Dingell, John Conyers, Sandy Levin, Gary Peters, and Hansen Clarke.

The president of the Metropolitan Detroit Central Labor Council, our host, Saundra Williams; AFL–CIO president, Rich Trumka; president of the Michigan AFL–CIO, Mark Gaffney; and some proud sons and daughters of Michigan representing working people here and across the country: SEIU President Mary Kay Henry, Teamsters President Jimmy Hoffa, UAW President Bob King, Utility Workers President Mike Langford. We are proud of them, and we're proud of your congressional delegation, who are working every single day with your State and local elected officials to create jobs and economic growth and prosperity here in Michigan and all across the country.

I am honored, we are honored, to spend this day with you and your families, the working men and women of America. This day belongs to you. You deserve a little R&R, a little barbecue—[*laughter*]—little grilling—because you've been working hard. You've been working hard to make ends meet. You've been working hard to build a better life for your kids. You've been working hard to build a better Detroit. But that's not all I'm going to talk to you about.

I also want to talk about the work you've been doing for decades: work to make sure that folks get an honest day's pay for an honest day's work; work to make sure that families get a fair shake. The work you've done that helped build the greatest middle class the world has ever known. I'm talking about the work that got us a 40-hour workweek and weekends, and paid leave and pensions, and the minimum wage and health insurance, and Social Security and Medicare, the cornerstones of middle class security. That's because of your work.

If you want to know who helped lay these cornerstones of an American middle class you just have to look for the union label.

That's the bedrock this country is built on: hard work; responsibility; sacrifice; looking out for one another; giving everybody a shot, everybody a chance to share in America's prosperity, from the factory floor to the boardroom. That's what unions are all about.

And that's something that's worth keeping in mind today. We've come through a difficult decade in which those values were all too often given short shrift. We've gone through a decade where wealth was valued over work and greed was valued over responsibility. And the decks were too often stacked against ordinary folks in favor of the special interests. And everywhere I went while I was running for this office, I met folks who felt their economic security slipping away, men and women who were fighting harder and harder just to stay afloat. And that was even before the economic crisis hit, and that just made things even harder.

So these are tough times for working Americans. They're even tougher for Americans who are looking for work, and a lot of them have been looking for work for a long time. A lot of folks have been looking for work for a long time here in Detroit and all across Michigan and all across the Midwest and all across the country. So we've got a lot more work to do to recover fully from this recession.

But I'm not satisfied just to get back to where we were before the recession; we've got to fully restore the middle class in America. And America cannot have a strong, growing economy without a strong, growing middle class and without a strong labor movement.

That's the central challenge that we face in our country today. That's at the core of why I ran for President. That's what I've been fighting for since I've been President. Everything we've done, it's been thinking about you. We said working folks deserved a break. So within 1 month of me taking office, we signed into law the biggest middle class tax cut in history, putting more money into your pockets.

We said working folks shouldn't be taken advantage of, so we passed tough financial reform that ended the days of taxpayer bailouts and stopped credit card companies from gouging you with hidden fees and unfair rate hikes and set up a new consumer protection agency with one responsibility: sticking up for you.

We said that if you're going to work hard all day to provide a better life for your kids, then we're going to make sure that those kids get the best education possible. So we helped keep teachers on the job. We're reforming our public schools, and we're investing in community colleges and job training programs. And we ended wasteful giveaways that went to the big banks and used the savings to make college more affordable for millions of your kids.

We said that every family in America should have affordable, accessible health care. We said you shouldn't be discriminated against because you've got a preexisting condition. We said young adults without insurance should be able to stay on their parents' plan. We got that done for you.

And here's what else we said, Detroit. We said that American autoworkers could once again build the best cars in the world. So we stood by the auto industry. And we made some tough choices that were necessary to make it succeed. And now the Big Three are turning a profit and hiring new workers and building the best cars in the world right here in Detroit, right here in the Midwest, right here in the United States of America.

I know it. I've seen it. I've been to GM's Hamtramck plant. I've been to Chrysler's Jefferson North plant. I've seen Detroit prove the cynics and the naysayers wrong.

We didn't just stop there. We said American workers could manufacture the best products in the world. So we invested in high-tech manufacturing, and we invested in clean energy. And right now, there's an advanced battery industry taking root here in Michigan that barely existed before. Half of the workers at one plant in Detroit were unemployed before a new battery company came to town. And we're growing our exports so that more of the world buys products that are stamped with three simple words: Made in America.

So that's what we're fighting for, Michigan. We're fighting for good jobs with good wages. We're fighting for health care when you get sick. We're fighting for a secure retirement even if you're not rich. We're fighting for the chance to give our kids a better life than we had. That's what we're doing to restore middle class security and rebuild this economy the American way, based on balance and fairness and the same set of rules for everybody from Wall Street to Main Street, an economy where hard work pays off, and gaming the system doesn't pay off, and everybody has got a shot at the American Dream. That's what we're fighting for.

On Thursday, we're going to lay out a new way forward on jobs to grow the economy and put more Americans back to work right now. I don't want to give everything away right here, because I want you all to tune in on Thursday, but I'll give you just a little bit.

We've got roads and bridges across this country that need rebuilding. We've got private companies with the equipment and the manpower to do the building. We've got more than 1 million unemployed construction workers ready to get dirty right now. There is work to be done, and there are workers ready to do it. Labor is on board. Business is on board. We just need Congress to get on board. Let's put America back to work.

Last year, we worked together, Republicans and Democrats, to pass a payroll tax cut. And because of that, this year the average family has an extra \$1,000 in their pocket because of it. But that's going to expire in a few months if we don't come together to extend it. And I think putting money back in the pockets of working families is the best way to get demand rising, because that then means business is hiring, and that means the Government—that means that the economy is growing.

So I'm going to propose ways to put America back to work that both parties can agree to, because I still believe both parties can work together to solve our problems. And given the urgency of this moment, given the hardship that many people are facing, folks have got to get together.

But we're not going to wait for them. We're going to see if we've got some straight shooters in Congress. We're going to see if congressional Republicans will put country before party. We'll give them a plan, and then we'll say, do you want to create jobs? Then put our construction workers back to work rebuilding America. Do you want to help our companies succeed? Open up new markets for them to sell their products. You want—you say you're the party of tax cuts? Well then, prove you'll fight just as hard for tax cuts for middle class families as you do for oil companies and the most affluent Americans. Show us what you got.

The time for Washington games is over; the time for action is now. No more manufactured crises. No more games. Now is not the time for the people you sent to Washington to worry about their jobs, now is the time for them to worry about your jobs.

Now, let me say a word about labor in particular. Now, I know this is not going to be an easy time. I know it's not easy when there's some folks who have their sights trained on you. After all that unions have done to build and protect the middle class, you've got people trying

to claim that you're responsible for the problems middle class folks are facing. You've got some Republicans saying you're the ones exploiting working families. Imagine that.

Now, the fact is, our economy is stronger when workers are getting paid good wages and good benefits. Our economy is stronger when we've got broad-based growth and broad-based prosperity. That's what unions have always been about: shared prosperity.

You know, I was on the plane flying over here, and Carl Levin was with me, and he showed me a speech that Harry Truman had given on Labor Day 63 years ago, right here in Detroit—63 years ago. And just to show that things haven't changed much, he talked about how Americans had voted in some folks into Congress who weren't very friendly to labor. And he pointed out that some working folks and even some union members voted these folks in. And now they were learning their lesson. And he pointed out that—and I'm quoting here—"the gains of labor were not accomplished at the expense of the rest of the Nation. Labor's gains contributed to the Nation's general prosperity."

What was true in—back in 1948 is true in 2011. When working families are doing well, when they're getting a decent wage and they're getting decent benefits, that means they're good customers for businesses. That means they can buy the cars that you build. That means that you can buy the food from the farmers. That means you can buy from Silicon Valley, that you are creating prosperity when you share in prosperity.

So when I hear some of these folks trying to take collective bargaining rights away, trying to pass so-called "right to work" laws for private sector workers, that really means the right to work for less and less and less. When I hear some of this talk, I know this is not about economics, this is about politics.

And I want everybody here to know, as long as I'm in the White House I'm going to stand up for collective bargaining.

Audience members. Four more years! Four more years! Four more years!

The President. That's why we've reversed harmful decisions that were designed to undermine those rights. That's why we passed the Fair Pay Act to stop pay discrimination. That's why we appointed people who are actually fulfilling their responsibilities to make sure that the offices and factories and mine workers that clock in each day, that they're actually safe on the job.

And we're going to keep at it. Because having a voice on the job and a chance to organize and a chance to negotiate for a fair day's pay after a hard day's work, that is the right of every man and woman in America, not just the CEO in the corner office, but also the janitor who cleans that office after the CEO goes home. Everybody has got the same right.

And that's true for public employees as well. Look, the recession had a terrible effect on State and local budgets; we all understand that. Unions have recognized that; they've already made tough concessions. In the private sector, we live in a more competitive global economy. So unions like the UAW understand that workers have to work with management to revamp business models, to innovate so we can sell our products around the world. We understand that the world is changing; unions understand that the world is changing. Unions understand they need to help drive the change, whether it's on the factory floor or in the classroom or in the Government office.

But what unions also know is that the values at the core of the union movement, those don't change. Those are the values that have made this country great. That's what the folks

trying to undermine your rights don't understand. When union workers agree to pay freezes and pay cuts, they're not doing it just to keep their jobs. They're doing it so that their fellow workers—their fellow Americans—can keep their jobs.

When teachers agree to reforms in how schools are run at the same time as they're digging into their pockets to buy school supplies for those kids, they do so because they believe every child can learn. They do it because they know something that those who seek to divide us don't understand: We are all in this together. That's why those crowds came out to support you in Madison and in Columbus. We are one Nation. We are one people. We will rise and we will fall together.

Anyone who doesn't believe it should come here to Detroit. It's like the commercial says: This is a city that's been to heck and back. And while there are a lot of challenges here, I see a city that's coming back.

You ask somebody here if times are tough, they'll say, "Yeah, it's tough, but we're tougher." Look at what we're doing to overcome. Look at what we're doing to rebuild and reinvent and redefine what it means to live in this great city. Look at our parents who catch the first bus to work and our students who stay up late to earn a degree. Look at our workers on the line at Hamtramck and Jefferson North who are building the best cars in the world. Look at our artists who are revamping our city and our young people who are thinking up new ways to make a difference that we never dreamed of. Look how we look out for one another.

That's why we chose Detroit as one of the cities that we're helping revitalize in our Strong Cities, Strong Communities initiative. We're teaming up with everybody—mayors, local officials, you name it—boosting economic development, rebuilding your communities the best way, which is a way that involves you. Because despite all that's changed here, and all the work that lies ahead, this is still a city where men clocked into factories. This is the city that built the greatest middle class the world has ever known. This is the city where women rolled up their sleeves and helped build an arsenal for democracy to free the world. This is a city where the great American industry has come back to life and the industries of tomorrow are taking root. This is a city where people, brave and bold, courageous and clever, are dreaming up ways to prove the skeptics wrong and write the next proud chapter in our history.

That's why I wanted to be here with you today. Because for every cynic and every naysayer running around talking about how our best days are behind us, for everybody who keeps going around saying, "No we can't"—

Audience members. Yes we can!

The President. —for everybody who can always find a reason why we can't rebuild America, I meet Americans every day who, in the face of impossible odds, they've got a different belief. They believe we can. You believe we can.

Yes, times are tough. But we've been through tough times before. I don't know about you, but I'm not scared of tough times. I'm not scared of tough times because I know we're going to be all marching together and walking together and working together and rebuilding together. And I know we don't quit. I know we don't give up our dreams and settle for something less. We roll up our sleeves, and we remember a fundamental truth of our history: We are strong when we are united. We're firing all cylinders.

The union movement is going to be at the center of it. And if all of you are committed to making sure that the person standing next to you, and their kids and their grandkids, that

everybody in this city and everybody in this country can unleash his or her potential, if you work hard and play by the rules, you will get a fair shake and get a fair shot. That's the country I want for my kids. That's the country you want for your kids. That's the country we're going to build together.

Thank you very much, Detroit. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:30 p.m. in a parking lot at the General Motors Plant. In his remarks, he referred to UAW member Ghana Goodwin-Dye.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Labor Day in Detroit, MI.

Locations: Detroit, MI.

Names: Clarke: Hansen H.; Conyers, John, Jr.; Dingell, John D., Jr.; Gaffney, Mark T.; Goodwin-Dye, Ghana; Henry, Mary Kay; Hoffa, James P.; King, Bob; Langford, Michael D.; Levin, Carl; Levin, Sander M.; Peters, Gary C.; Solis, Hilda L.; Stabenow, Deborah A.; Trumka, Richard L.; Williams, Sandra L.

Subjects: Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Improvement; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Strengthening efforts; Business and industry : Manufacturing industry :: Strengthening efforts; Business and industry: Global competitiveness; Civil rights : Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009; Commerce, international : U.S. exports :: Expansion; Congress : Bipartisanship; Economy, national : Consumer Financial Protection Bureau; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Financial regulations, modernization efforts; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Student loans, elimination of subsidies to private providers; Education : Standards and school accountability; Education : Teachers; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job losses; Employment and unemployment : Job training programs; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies : Promotion efforts; Energy : Hybrid and alternative fuel automobiles :: Battery technology, U.S. production; Health and medical care : Affordability and costs; Health and medical care : Employer-based health insurance coverage; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; Health and medical care : Young adults :: Insurance coverage as dependents, age limit extension; Holidays and special observances : Labor Day; Housing : Urban and metropolitan policy; Housing: and Urban Development, Department of : Strong Cities, Strong Communities initiative; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Labor issues : Unions :: America Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); Labor issues : Unions :: Labor movement and organized labor; Labor issues : Unions :: Public employees, unionization and collective bargaining; Labor issues : Unions :: Service Employees International Union (SEIU); Labor issues : Workplace safety, improvement efforts; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Michigan : President's visit; Social Security and retirement : Social Security program; Taxation : Payroll tax cut; Taxation : Tax relief; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts.

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